

Cooperative Extension Service (CES) and Agricultural Experiment Station (AES) assist the New Mexico livestock industry with vegetation monitoring studies.

NMSU further notes that sound science and site-specific monitoring and assessment data are critical for management decisions, which need to be dynamic and flexible in order to respond to rapidly changing resource conditions. Long-term range condition and trend data are fundamentally necessary for grazing operations and agency personnel to make comprehensive assessments of resource conditions, livestock management strategies and wildlife numbers. Federal agency objectives, rancher livestock management objectives, and New Mexico Department of Game and Fish responsibilities may all be simultaneously addressed with solid monitoring data. Without these types of site-specific data, officials and ranchers cannot make informed decisions and carry out their responsibilities. A core team of objective, impartial resource monitoring expertise is necessary to: be proactive to the challenge of resource management; provide continuity of management; provide a foundation of vegetation data collected with established methodologies and an inventory of improvements on the ground.

NMSU adds that this legislation will support NMSU's rangeland vegetation monitoring programs and will facilitate increased growth in external research funding generated by faculty with dedicated appointments to rangeland system function. Moreover, this initiative will compound fiscal benefits by increasing professional expertise, providing state matching funds, making grant requests more successful, and leading to more resolutions of costly rangeland natural resource problems.

CHE indicates that these projects receive recurring funding within the overall general fund recommendation for Research and Public Service Projects, and that the commission has recommended funding in the amount of \$13,368,900 for the Agricultural Experiment Station and \$10,353,400 for the Cooperative Extension Services programs in FY06. However, CHE adds that this expansion request was not in the list of priority projects submitted by NMSU to CHE for review. Accordingly, the request was not included in the commission's funding recommendation for FY06.

PERFORMANCE IMPLICATIONS

Cooperative Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station will employ the NMSU Range Improvement Task Force (RITF) – a response team approach in conjunction with traditional education outreach methods – to address rangeland health issues. The RITF investigates impacts to federal lands, focusing at the ranch-unit level, while providing objective information to ranchers and governmental policy makers, and offering scientific solutions to rangeland issues and disputes. NMSU notes that the RITF is nonpartisan, and concerned only with the long-term health of rangeland.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

The appropriation of \$250,000 contained in this bill is a recurring expense to the general fund. Any unexpended or unencumbered balance remaining at the end of FY06 shall revert to the general fund.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS

New Mexico State University will retain oversight of this appropriation.

CONFLICT, DUPLICATION, COMPANIONSHIP, RELATIONSHIP

Relates to the appropriation for New Mexico State University in the General Appropriations Act.

Duplicates HB866 in that HB866 also seeks to appropriate \$250,000 from the general fund to the Board of Regents of New Mexico State University for expenditure in FY06 to assist the livestock industry with vegetation monitoring studies by the College of Agriculture.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

NMSU suggests that new resources will allow the RITF to enhance its role as a provider of unbiased, state-of-the-art, scientific information, evaluation, and assessment. For NMSU to continue providing leadership, new strengths must be included in our natural resource Extension and research programs. To ensure uniform and planned implementation of management policies, these scientists, along with the existing RITF team, must provide input and assessment on policies affecting both public and private land users in the West. This expanded RITF focus will assist in good stewardship and long-term health of the West's natural resources, while recognizing the multi-cultural heritage of the region and the importance of management for long-term sustainability.

OTHER SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

As general background, NMSU indicates that the New Mexico range livestock industry has gross revenues of greater than \$1 billion. The industry affects more than 70 million acres within the state. Forage supply has been shrinking state-wide over the last century. Reduction of timber harvesting during the last decade, exclusion of frequently occurring low-intensity fires, increasing densities of small-diameter trees, piñon-juniper encroachment, and a decreasing area of mountain meadows due to tree encroachment have all contributed to reducing forage available for ungulates and other ecological functions. Additionally, a rapidly expanding elk population has intensified the competition for forage with a static, or decreasing, livestock population. These phenomena, coupled with extended drought, have created an imbalance between already stressed forage conditions and the demands being placed upon them. The manner in which these imbalances are addressed will make the difference between success and failure. Lack of proper funding will impede, and possibly prevent, the cooperative and adaptive resource management strategies needed to successfully address these challenges of maintaining valuable natural resources while preserving the economic viability and structure of small New Mexico communities.

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